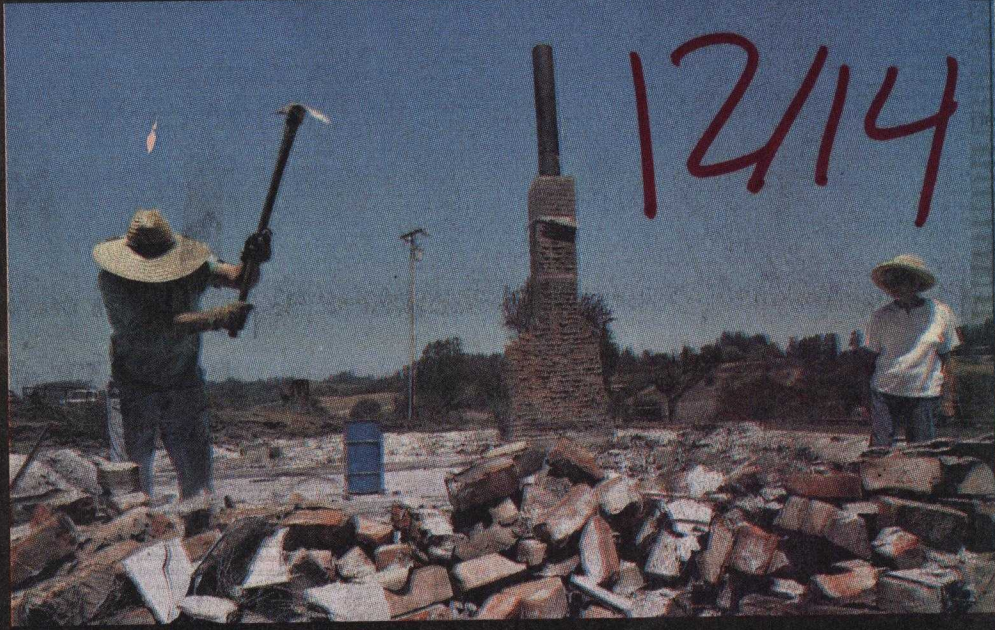


# RISING TO REBUILD

Two vastly different communities — one in the mountains, the other closer to the sea — are trying to rebuild after a harrowing California fire season that burned 1.4 million acres and destroyed 1,400 homes and other structures. One group of victims is being embraced in its effort toward rebirth. The others feel unwelcome on the land they've lived on for decades. Here are their stories.

## TRABING FIRE



**CONSUMED BY FLAMES:** John and Barbara Hoover clean debris from the burned house near Watsonville they rented to their daughter and her family.



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

**REBUILDING BEGINS:** Diana Weatherholt has begun reconstruction on her Larkin Valley Road property. Her home was destroyed in the Trabing fire.

Fire + Fire Protection - 2000

## Families rely on friends, inner strengths as they put their lives back together

By Ken McLaughlin  
*Mercury News*

As autumn turns into winter, signs of rebirth in Larkin Valley are everywhere. Tough, verdant grasses are helping to heal scarred hillsides. Doves and great horned owls are returning to their old haunts. And members of the Teague family, known by their neighbors in this gentle valley northwest of Watsonville for their elaborate Christmas displays, have strung red, blue, orange and green lights. This Christmas, however, the lights grace a couple of old RVs parked where the Teagues' ranch-style house stood before a raging wildfire in June destroyed it along with 25 other homes. "Our lives were vaporized within minutes," said Tom Teague, an electrical

engineer whose family lost a pet cat and virtually everything it owned. For the Teagues and two other neighbors on the same side of the valley, the terrible fire was only the beginning of a transformational trauma that has included every emotion, from grief to anger to an unexpected sense of peace. Through it all, the Teagues, the family of Diana Weatherholt and the husband-and-wife veterinary team of George McKay and Gwen DeBaere have discovered new friends and inner strengths on their journeys to rebuild. The families have also come to treasure what the Trabing fire could not destroy. The Larkin Valley neighborhood is

See **TRABING**, Page 16

### GRAPHIC

Details on acreage and property destroyed by the Trabing and Summit fires. **PAGE 17A**

### VIDEO

Residents talk about their lost homes and their hopes for rebuilding. [www.mercurynews.com](http://www.mercurynews.com)

Summit 12-14-08

## SUMMIT FIRE

### Houses without permits burned in rugged terrain

By Lisa M. Krieger  
*Mercury News*

Six months ago, the cooling ashes in this remote section of the Santa Cruz Mountains exposed the ruins of a dozen houses that were never permitted to be built in the first place. The Summit fire not only destroyed the homes of the residents of Maymens Flat, but it exposed these rugged individualists to the very things they went into the mountains to avoid: inspectors, permits, surveys, reports, hearings and lawyers. While victims of Santa Cruz County's other two major fires are slowly rebuilding, these ridge dwellers are no longer welcome to live on their own land. Now, they must decide whether to break the law and stay — or move away and give up this life of isolated beauty. Ian McClelland isn't going anywhere. "Really, we just want to be left alone," said McClelland, a systems engineer-

See **SUMMIT**, Page 17

**RISING TO REBUILD**

All the fire victims say they've learned the grandeur of friendship.



George McKay practices on the bagpipes while walking where his house once stood on his property on Larkin Valley Road near Watsonville.





PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

George McKay gets a hug from his mother, Jacoba, after a visit to his property on Larkin Valley Road near Watsonville last month.

# TRABING | Rebuilding homes

Continued from Page 1

one of dozens in California recovering from one of the worst fire seasons in decades, burning 1.4 million acres.

## Valley engulfed

The Trabling fire, named after nearby Trabling Road, started a few hours before the summer solstice June 20, when sparks from a vehicle's faulty exhaust system ignited grass on the side of Highway 1 just before 2 p.m.

Larkin Valley residents, who only hours before awakened to a sunny morning rich with the sounds of horses whinnying and children giggling, saw an inferno engulf their neighborhood of rolling pastures, graceful white fences and eucalyptus groves. The fire destroyed 26 homes; 44 cars, trucks and recreational vehicles; 58 outbuildings and other structures; and about 50 horses, llamas, cats and dogs.

"It was just shocking to see what could happen to our home and beautiful land in an instant," said veterinarian DeBaere, 42, who lives with her husband on a plateau that instantly gained a commanding view of Larkin Valley when their home and about 500 trees were incinerated. "Our clients would come up here and start crying."

Before the fire struck, Weatherholt, a 52-year-old X-ray technician, had been living with her elderly parents and her 20-year-old daughter, Cassie Ueberrhein, who was home from college for the summer.

Weatherholt was home

alone that day. And because of recent knee surgery, she was on crutches. But a friend who stopped by to pick up some fishing gear led her to safety soon after her attic caught fire.

McKay and DeBaere run a mobile veterinary business, but that day a client had asked to come to their house. After they saw an ominous orange glow in the sky outside their back window, they escaped with their horse, cat and two great danes.

Robin Teague and her children — Christopher, 16, and Angela, 18 — were at vacation Bible school in Aptos when they saw the blaze. Robin called her husband, Tom, who was at work in Scotts Valley. He raced home, only to see four-fifths of his house on the ground smoldering and his bedroom being consumed by fire.

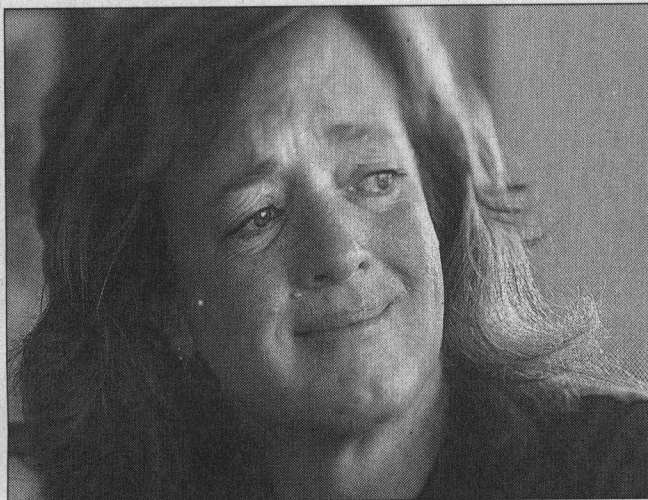
## Family memories

The morning after the fire, as Weatherholt waded through the ashes, she remembered the day in 1991 when she and her ex-husband walked into the house and "felt its arms surround us," telling them that this was the place they were going to raise their children.

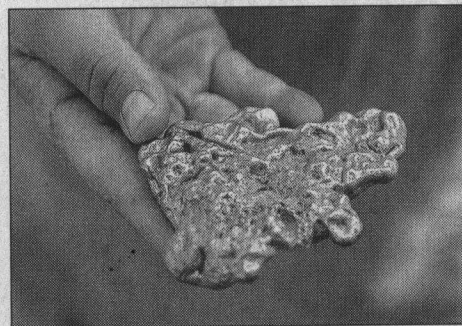
"It was a strong, beautiful house," said Weatherholt, who moved to a small rental home while she rebuilds.

During the first few days after the fire, Robin Teague said, she was simply stunned. "You're a deer caught in the headlights," said Teague, 51. "And you have to depend on other people to provide direction."

Even though the Teagues'



Robin Teague talks about the June day her family's home burned down in the Trabling fire near Watsonville.



George McKay holds a lump of melted aluminum he found in the rubble where his house once stood on his Larkin Valley Road property.

home was insured by Robin's parents, John and Barbara Hoover, who own it, the family didn't have insurance for its belongings. Then, several weeks after the blaze, Tom Teague lost his job.

But out of the tragedy came sweet blessings.

Families from the Teagues' church let them stay at their homes; one gave them an RV and told them to keep it for as long as they needed it. Clients of McKay and DeBaere raised money for them.

The Teagues' pastor was in Bulgaria at the time of the fire. He told the story to two congregations there, and they quickly raised \$300 for the Teagues.

"In Bulgaria!" said a still-incredulous Robin.

## Comforts of home

But, as time passed, the lives of the fire victims turned into mountains of stress, as they longed for the comforts of their old lives.

"I'm still looking forward

to a shower where I can turn around," said Tom Teague, 50, referring to his 18-inch-by-3-foot RV shower.

Then there was the give-and-take with insurance adjusters and the notoriously picky Santa Cruz County Planning Department.

Ironically, though, the tanking economy and rotten housing market made things easier. As construction activity across Northern California ground to a halt, planners were able to spend more time processing rebuilding plans. Contractors, too, got hungrier and hungrier.

"We've had several foundation contractors tell us they could start the work tomorrow," DeBaere said.

In two out of three cases, insurance companies have been cooperative, too.

The exception is Weatherholt's insurer. "I'm lucky I was on disability," she said. "Dealing with the insurance company was a full-time job."

She said her home will cost about \$1.3 million to rebuild, but so far the company has offered only \$750,000, even though it was insured for \$1.2 million.

Because the new home of McKay and DeBaere is modular and being built at a factory, they'll be the first of the three neighbors to move back in after the fire, probably in the spring.

As Christmas and New Year's approach, all three families can't help but think just how much worse it could have been.

## 'Just stuff'

If McKay and DeBaere had

been out on the road in their van as they are most Friday afternoons, "all our animals would have been dead," said McKay, 38. Added DeBaere: "All of the stuff that we lost was just stuff."

Living in the camping trailer their insurance company rented for them has been a bit cramped. But, McKay said, "our friends tell us we're the happiest homeless couple they know."

McKay continues to play his bagpipes every night; and he recently won a Western states competition.

Weatherholt says she's come to accept that people can't control their lives no matter how much they try. "I also found out that you really only need about 2 percent of the material things that you have," said Weatherholt, who has decided to sell her house once it's rebuilt.

She feels the new home — which because of fire laws won't be nearly as rustic as the old one — will never feel like the place where she raised her kids.

"I think a new family should live here," she said.

All the fire victims say they've learned the grandeur of friendship and the joy of making it out of hell alive.

"If you were a hermit or loner, you'd learn after your house burned down just how foolish that was," Tom Teague said. "It's the connections with those who you love and who love you that get you through it."

Contact Ken McLaughlin at [kmclaughlin@mercurynews.com](mailto:kmclaughlin@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-5552.

## RISING TO REBUILD

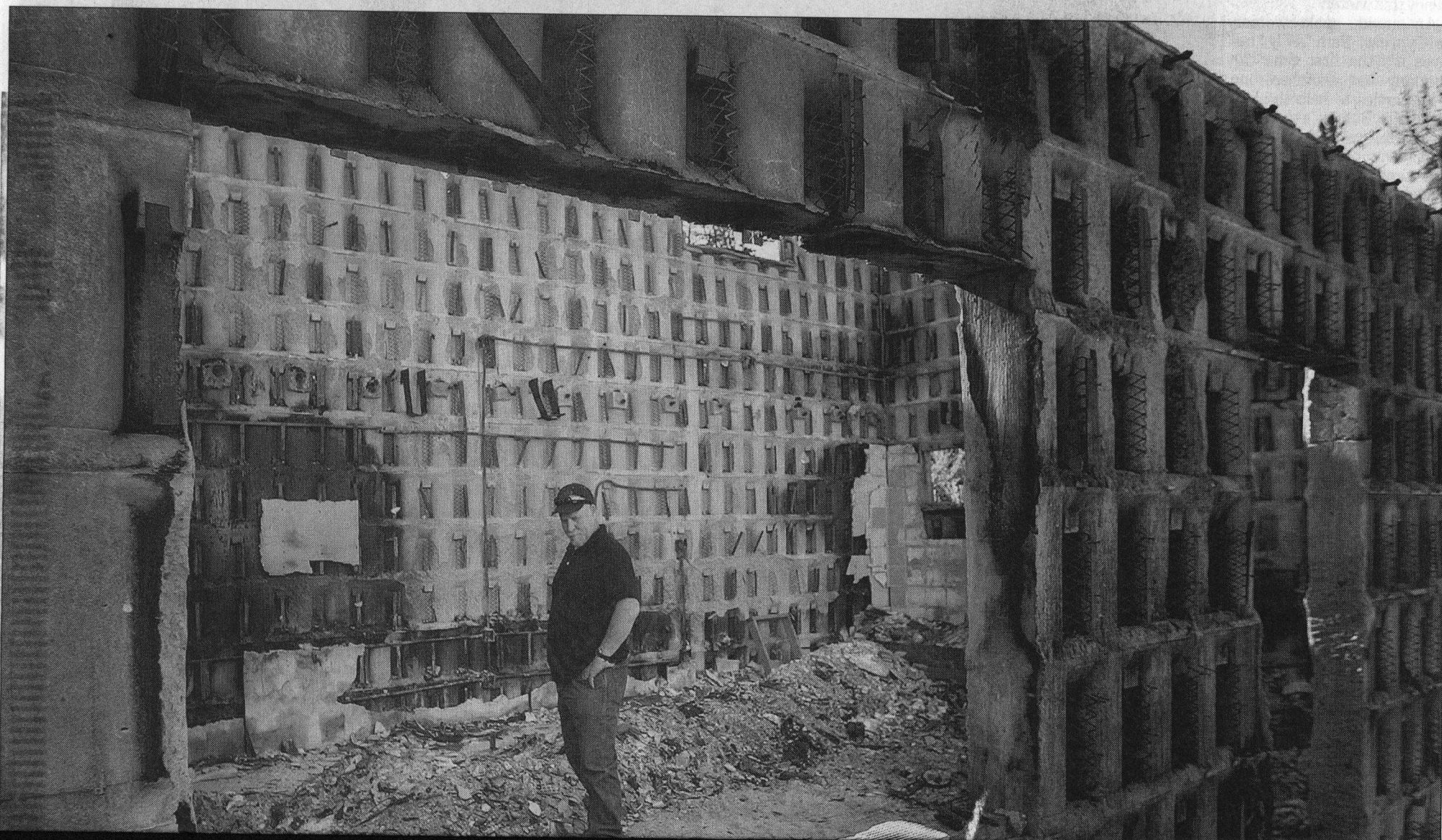
Until plans are approved, they're prohibited from living on their land.

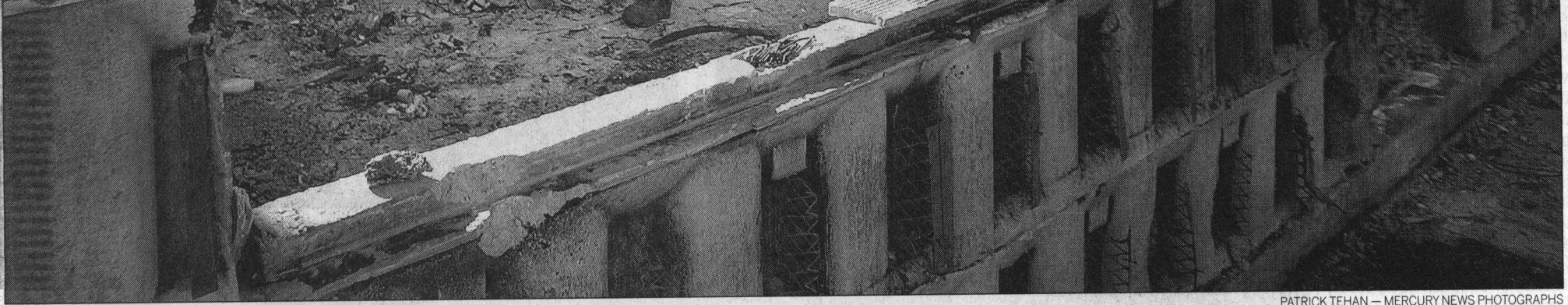


The Summit fire destroyed 63 homes in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Some of the vegetation that burned on remote hillsides in the spring is now coming back.



Ian McClelland shows a metal figurine, one of a few things left when his home was destroyed in the Summit fire.





PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Ian McClelland stands in the ruins of the home on his property in the Santa Cruz Mountains. He is planning to rebuild the home, but says he can't afford county permit fees.

# SUMMIT | Fire in rugged terrain

*Continued from Page 1*

ing manager at Lockheed Martin in Sunnyvale. "For the first time in the 20 years I've lived here, I'm getting a fence and a locked gate."

He and his neighbors say it isn't Mother Nature that makes them nervous — it's county inspectors.

Every burned home along this isolated ridgeline was built without permits, as were half of the 63 homes consumed by the Summit blaze in the spring. These Maymens Flat residents constructed their houses with their own hands, at the end of a long private dirt road, many miles from most county services — and inspectors. None of them had insurance.

Now, with huge financial losses and nowhere to live, they say they can't afford the money and time needed to get through Santa Cruz County's notoriously tough building process. They face regulatory expenses that could exceed the cost of replacing their cabins. To get a permit, they've been told to get in line along with every other applicant in the county. Until plans are approved, they're prohibited from living on their land.

"It's almost like they have a vested interest in making things difficult," McClelland said from an Airstream trailer where he contemplates his future.

## Safety issues

The rigorous rules are there for a reason, many say. Without inspections and without permits, they say, there is no way to guarantee that the buildings are safe and the environment

is protected. And, many ask, why should firefighters be expected to put their lives at risk to save illegally built homes?

While legal structures can be replaced under streamlined rules and lower fees, those who lost illegal structures must start from scratch, according to Santa Cruz County Planning Department rules.

In a letter to fire victims, Planning Director Tom Burns warned: "Building without permits is illegal. ... It is very important for you to not allow new unpermitted uses to be re-established on your property."

If the county gets a complaint about the re-establishment of an illegal house in the Summit fire area, it will investigate and "redtag" the property to demand legal compliance, Burns wrote. Red-tagging is considered a cloud on a property's title, making it difficult to insure, finance or sell.

Furthermore, while residents with legal homes can live on their property while they rebuild, those without permits cannot, he added. According to Santa Cruz County law, only legal dwellings may keep a recreational vehicle on their property.

McClelland said he approached the county building department in 1987 but was frustrated by its response. "I thought it would be a cooperative effort. It wasn't. They didn't seem sympathetic to owner-builders," he said.

So instead he struck out on his own, devoting four years and \$420,000 to construct a barn, corral, toolshed and a bunkerlike concrete home that overlooked a scenic canyon. Despite fierce

winds, heavy rains and hot summer sun, he cherishes the setting. "The night sky is incredible. And I like having my horses here with me," he said. "There's peace and quiet here. We have wild boars in the gully, even mountain lions and the occasional eagle."

When he awoke to the May 22 predawn blaze — believed to have started when high winds sparked embers from a brush-clearing fire on

a neighbor's property — he stayed behind to defend his home, while his wife and dogs escaped. But the blaze barreled up the hillside; he fled just in time. "When I heard my ammo explode, I knew things weren't good," he recalled.

## Rebuilding plans

McClelland wants to slowly rebuild his home and barn, as money and energy allow. With expertise in engineering, he

wants to build structures of recycled materials, using solar and wind power. He says he'll meet building code standards. But he says he can't afford the permit fees, which he estimates could start at \$18,000 and climb far higher. He's been unable to get a Small Business Administration loan. And the economic downturn has shrunk his 401(k).

But he worries that the county could shut him down. Uninvited, a dozen county officials recently toured the property of a neighbor who had just re-excavated a pond. "What kind of fascist stuff is that?" McClelland asked.

One neighbor estimates that it will cost \$113,500 to comply with county requirements to build a "kit" cabin worth \$91,000 in materials and labor. "They don't maintain our road; we get no police protection; we don't use public water, sewer or mail service. School buses don't pick up our children," said one resident, who asked to not be named for fear of angering officials.

Gordon Stewart of an anti-planning-department group called Alliance for Change contends that "it's getting more and more difficult to rebuild. People in rural areas don't get any support or help."

Sacramento-based land-use attorney Ronald A. Zumbun said permits are important. "But the goal should be to help these people get back on their feet fast and with the least amount of bureaucracy. Of the counties I've worked with, Santa Cruz, in my opinion, has been the worst."

So far, only two permits have been requested to replace

the 47 lost homes. One of them was just granted to Maymens Flat viticulturist Kenneth Kim, who for weeks slept in the back of a truck, then a small shed. "This time I'm doing it the right way," he said.

County officials say illegal structures never should have been there in the first place and deserve no special breaks. They pose a hazard to firefighters and police, they say.

"Our primary obligation is to make sure a house is safe for occupants and visitors — now and into the future. And to make sure that a home is built in a healthy and environmentally sensitive manner," said assistant planning director David Lee.

Regulations protect firefighters, as well, said Kay Price, fire information officer for Santa Cruz County. Buildings permits are the basis for the fire department's address book — and assure firefighters that homes are made of fire-retardant materials, she said. "If we don't know a structure is there and it looks like a dirt road that goes nowhere, that can be a huge problem," she said.

"If you're not part of the process, you don't have the process to help you out," said Dennis Flynn, building permit technician.

McClelland and his neighbors say their homes were in ashes by the time county assistance arrived on that dreadful day. They don't want county officials there now.

"We just want to be on our own," he said.

Contact Lisa M. Krieger at [lkrieger@mercurynews.com](mailto:lkrieger@mercurynews.com) or (408) 920-5565.



MERCURY NEWS